

PLANET STORIES



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CONFUSION CARGO

By KENNETH PUTNAM

The hellship hung motionless in the cold black void. Men tiptoed along her echoing corridors, gun hands trembling. What menace gripped the engines? Who was this Dr. Sims?



Weapons coughed brokenly at the stern of the ship.

CAPTAIN ANDREAS STEGGO had commanded a light negship in the late war before peace and retirement had given him the master's position aboard the Sagittarian Line's *Reward*. He was big, slightly brutal and accustomed to absolute obedience from his crews.

On the other hand, the crew hastily

signed on by the Aldebaranian office were all ex-cargo jockeys of the twenty-five planet system thrown out of work by the sudden cessation of hostilities. They were rough, fast-thinking and terrifically independent.

Excepting myself, there were no passengers. The voyage was to be especially long

—two months; the cargo was particularly nasty—ten tons of stinking viscodium.

Anyone with half an ounce of brain would have known there would be trouble. Unfortunately the requirements for an official of the Sagittarian Line include a university degree and galactic license; nothing about half an ounce of brain.

First we discovered the viscodium, instead of being sealed in dellite drums, was stored in a large tank with an overflow lid. That made for economy in shipping space, but also for certain discomfort in such useful functions as breathing. I'd lie awake at sleep period thinking of what would happen if the lid fell off and the green slime came churning through the loose hatches.

Then one of the loading pipes developed a leak under the strain of acceleration. The *Reward* was an old ship and she had been hastily serviced for this, her first trip in five years. Brock, the ship's welder, burst the pipe while repairing it and we tossed him, stiff within the congealed mass of viscodium, through an air-lock. No second welder either; so when the plumbing . . .

After the burial service, a delegation from the crew visited Captain Steggo and accused him of negligence in not having the loading pipes inspected for residual viscodium immediately after the take-off. They demanded their protest be logged. Steggo had all five of them clapped in restrainers. He then announced that full-dress discipline would be observed until we arrived; all ship's officers were to go armed at all times. I heard angry men in cheap *hwat* suits muttering after that about punishment half-meals and longer watches for a smaller active crew.

Mr. Skandelli, the chief engineer, visited me and offered a sawed-off shmober. I looked at the foot-long weapon and declined. "Never touch the stuff."

"More than this may be touched before we warp in," he said grimly. "When Aldebaranian riff-raff gets snappish, I start using the armory. And passengers are classed with officers."

"That's no compliment on the *Reward*."

He looked at me, holstered the shmober and left.

AN HOUR LATER, I was presented with the captain's compliments and asked to attend him on the bridge. The

whole business was beginning to annoy me more than slightly, but under the peculiar circumstances of my status I didn't feel like arousing any unnecessary antagonism. I went, determined not to be enlisted on either side—if it had come to choosing sides.

Steggo overflowed a huge armchair. A faint stubble covered his chin which, considering the cheapness of a depilosac, was unnecessarily filthy.

"Mr. Skandelli tells me you have no desire to be classed with the officers. However," he waved a huge paw to forestall my objections, "that's beside the point. You are Dr. R. Sims, late of Naval Research?"

"Yes. Robert Sims, physical chemist grade 2, Aldebaranian Project CBX-19329." I tried to keep my voice from quavering. This man wanted to bollix my papers.

He smiled and studied my questionnaire. "I am interested, Dr. Sims, in why a person of your standing chooses to travel on an uncomfortable cargo ship when the fastest negships and government cruisers are at his disposal."

"I am going home to visit my family whom I haven't seen in more than three years." I hoped my voice sounded confident. "Naval employees are not allowed aboard negships for matters of personal convenience. It would be six months before obtainable priorities would get me a cabin on a reconverted liner. Since my leave starts immediately, the *Reward* looked damn good."

Papers rustled as he held them up to the light. "The seal is genuine enough. Ordinarily, the matter would not have come to my attention. But remember, we are still traveling under the mercantile sections of the articles of war. After your amazing outburst to Mr. Skandelli—who approached you at my instigation, by the way—I thought you merited looking into."

"I told Mr. Skandelli what any passenger in his right mind would have. Having paid for my passage, my protection is in your hands and not in mine." I touched the door button. "May I go?"

"One moment." He turned his massive head slowly. "Mr. Ballew, bring in the prisoners."

Ballew was the astrogator. He was a thin fair-haired fellow who had been

hunched over his charts during the interview. He grimaced and left, returning in a few seconds with five men.

The first of them was the tallest man I'd ever seen, not excluding the captain. The yoke of the restraint about his neck barely seemed able to cover his body with its lines of force. His head was free to permit breathing, and the machine had been adjusted above his knees, enabling him to shuffle along in an odd, broken-legged fashion. The other four were likewise yoked.

Steggo introduced them to me.

"Ragin, whom I have logged as the leader of an abortive mutiny. The other woebegone gentlemen have names I either can't pronounce or don't choose to remember."

I waited, wondering how I came into this situation.

Suddenly the tall man spoke. The words seemed to come with difficulty because of the restraint pressing upon his diaphragm. "You'll remember us, Steggo, if I have to hunt your black heart across the galaxy."

The captain smiled. "A shmobbler squad on earth will quiet you. And it will be shmobbers for you after my report is in."

Ragin glared and shuffled rapidly across the small room. His intention was obviously to hurl himself against the captain. Steggo lurched out of his chair and placed it in front of the moving man. Ragin hit the chair, bounced off it and was hurled against a bulkhead. I heard the thud as his head smashed into metal. The astrogator helped him to his feet.

"That, too, will go into the log," Steggo puffed. "Now, Dr. Sims, if you will please come this way."

I followed him, disagreeably conscious of the murder thoughts swirling about in the bridge.

He walked to the ship's visor, fiddled with the dial and snapped it on. I gasped.

"That as you see is the hold. I was looking through at the hold where our Mr. Ragin and his little playmates were being kept. I thought I saw somebody bending over Ragin, feeding him. Mr. Skandelli was sent to investigate with the second officer and my suspicions were proven correct. The ship was then searched and six others found. Five of these are the wives of these men here; two belong to other

members of the crew who are now being placed in restraints themselves."

"Women!" I muttered. "Aboard a ship. Stowaways!"

"Ah, you are familiar with the mercantile sections of the articles of war. 'Any person of the feminine gender found aboard a ship engaged in interstellar flight without naval or military guard shall be subject to death or such other punishment as a court martial may direct.' That is the law, is it not?"

"But captain," I protested. "That law was directed against members of the Fino Feminist League who cooperated with the enemy during the war. It has never been used against civilians."

"Which is not to say it does not apply to civilians. I am fully aware that women have participated in our government during the entire conflict and even served with distinction during the Battle of the Dead Star. But the law is specific. It considers the costly sabotage at the time we were attacked and forbids women aboard ships on a blanket basis."

His heavy face seemed unusually thoughtful. He snapped off the visor.

"What do you want me to do?"

He pointed to the open log. "I've entered the entire incident; the fact that these men and two others, prior to the attempt at mutiny, did willfully smuggle their wives on board, in knowing violation by all parties concerned of space law." Ragin snorted heavily in the background. "I want you to sign the entry, testifying to the physical presence on ship of these women."

"But I'm not an officer. I'm not even an employee of the line!"

"That is precisely why I want your signature. It provides disinterested evidence. If you refuse, in the light of the emergency conditions now revealed as well as your semi-official naval status, I shall be forced to conclude you favor the mutinous elements. You will then be placed—"

He didn't have to finish. I signed.

STEGGO followed me courteously to the door. "Thank you, Dr. Sims. Mr. Ballew, please assemble the court martial."

Ballew had turned a fiery red. "But, sir, you aren't going to court-martial them before we reach earth!"

"I am, Mr. Ballew. And you will sit on

the court. Remember the mercantile sections: 'any merchant ship in priority categories 1AA, 1AB or 1AC whether proceeding with or without military or naval escort shall be considered to be on military or naval status for the purpose of discipline at the discretion of the master.' A viscodium cargo is sufficiently delicate to place us in category 1AC. And our dendro drive prohibits radio communication even if a ship this size carried an interstellar transmitter, which it doesn't. Please assemble the court."

As Ballew, breathing hard, hurried from the bridge, I thought of what a space lawyer we had for a captain. He'd probably been an administration officer until near the end when the bottom of the barrel was carefully scraped. Early retirement usually pointed to such a background. Kid discipline, himself!

"You appreciate the fact, captain, that the priority categories as well as the mercantile sections which you quote so glibly were all wartime measures?"

"I do. Wartime measures which have not yet been repealed. Now, Dr. Sims, if you would return to your cabin?"

I left, trying to throw some ocular comfort at Ragin while the door closed behind me. He was staring at my parplex jumper oddly, his brows knitted as if he were trying to decide something very important. I was wearing the naval *pi* with three palms.

My cabin had been searched. Officers or crew? I didn't know. It was no fun being a neutral, as many small and sorrowful planets have discovered.

The suitcase and toilet articles had been hastily rifled, clumsily put back into place. I felt the head of the bed. The invisible blusterbun still reposed on the head of the ledge. Obviously no search scanners or even colored powder had been employed.

Amateurs. A stellective would have used powder, at least.

I pocketed the tiny, completely transparent weapon and stretched out on the bed. My toilet articles caught my eye. The half-empty container of depilo-sac had been probed for hidden articles. White drippings of the stuff stained the red shelf. Well, they hadn't found anything there.

Nothing incriminating had been found in the suitcase either; I had selected its contents with great care. Rather a nice

touch that, choosing something old-fashioned like a suitcase instead of a modern space-saving collapsicon.

But if this mess got down to really sharp brass tacks, all my precautions wouldn't be worth a gram of plutonium in an atomic furnace. Damn Steggo anyway. Damn him and his mercantile sections. Damn Ragin. Damn the war.

I fell asleep in a wave of homesickness for the earth.

WEAPONS coughed brokenly at the stern of the ship. I came awake with my hand on the blusterbun. Somebody ran past my cabin screaming. The lights went off, came back on, then went off again.

I hit the floor of the bed as my pneumatic mattress was turned off too. Something rattled against the outside bulkhead and passed down the spaceship. Meteor dust? Not this far out. Probably Steggo turning on the gas sprinkler system. Or the mutineers.

So this was a mutiny. I had been in an atomic explosion and a devastating space negation in my time. I had been in the photonite plant on Rigel VIII when molecular joint lubricant was spilled against the dome, allowing our air to leak out into space. Now I was in a mutiny.

Fingers tapped on my door in a frantic message. I threw it open.

The man lying outside was evidently a crew member. He had a gaping, smoking hole instead of his chest.

"Jobal!" he almost whispered. "Please, please Jobal—" He seemed to belch; when he didn't move I realized it was a death rattle. I moved his hand gently and closed the door. I went back to the side-board of the bed and sat down.

Who was Jobal? A friend? His wife, sweetheart? One of his gods? I must have sat in the darkness for an hour. After a while I noticed the ship was silent again. There was only the rolling hum of the Dendros.

Footsteps became louder and stopped outside my door. There was the sound of a man stepping over the body. Then the door was flung open and two huge Aldebaranians strode in. They leveled still-throbbing shmobbars at my waist.

"Captain Ragin wants to see you."

Uh-huh. So the score was in. And now,

I imagined, all bets were being paid. And which side was I supposed to be on? I walked carelessly to the door, keeping the pocket in which I had the blusterbun away from them.

RAGIN sat in Steggo's chair. He didn't fill it as completely, but he looked just as dominant as the captain. Ballew pored over his charts in a corner. Except for the splash of blood on the floor, the room was as I had left it.

"Hello, Dr. Sims," Ragin grinned through puffed lips. Ballew didn't look up. "Some changes been made."

"For the better, I hope." I waited. This might be played a number of ways.

"Yeah. We think so." He looked behind me at my guards. "He's been searched?"

"Well—" one of them began.

"We didn't think—" the other fumbled.

"Great exploding novas! What do you blastheads think this is—a meeting of the Aldebaranian Benevolent Association?" He was on his feet snarling at them, his head almost two feet above mine.

"I can save you the trouble—er, captain." I flipped the blusterbun from my pocket and held it out, butt foremost.

He stared uncomprehendingly at my outstretched hand for a few moments. Then he reached forward gingerly and took the invisible weapon.

A smile twisted his mouth as he ran his fingers over its intricacies. "Well, I'll be washed by a comet's tail! A blusterbun! Dainty and deadly. I've heard about these things but I never hoped to have one. How does a civilian rate it?"

"Naval research," I reminded him.

Coolly, he appraised me. "Maybe. Maybe not. I'll still have to have you searched." The guards came up.

I moved away. "Now, wait a moment. I gave you my weapon. Had I wanted to, I could have shot you with the same motion before your zombie friends decided to swallow or wipe their mouths. I carry documents on my person that I most definitely don't want seen until I reach earth. Unless I'm mistaken, you want some favor of me. If you read those documents, all deals are automatically off; and you'll be in a mess about five times as disagreeable as a mutiny."

He took time to chew on that. Finally:

"O. K. Not that you can kill more than one man even if you have another weapon. If you start shooting, you'll be thoroughly butchered. And we do want a good deed out of you."

A tall, blonde woman came in with a tray. She prodded me with it. Catching on, I took a cup of hot liquid, Aldebaranian *hialiau juice*. Things were looking up.

"Elsa and I were just married. I wasn't going to leave her to the tender mercies of a fat sadist. The boys were all for mutiny thirty-six hours after we cleared Booma City, but I held them down until our wives were discovered. We've been miners and independent freightmen; we're not used to this sort of disciplinary guff."

My chin pointed at the red mess on the floor. "Steggo?"

"No. One of our boys. We've been careful to keep this a completely bloodless mutiny as far as the officers were concerned. As a result, there've been more casualties on our side than there should have been. We lost four men."

"Five," one of my guards broke in. "There was another stiff outside this guy's cabin. Couldn't see in the dark, but it felt like Rildek."

Ragin nodded. "Five, then. We'll have a roll call after we get the power turned back on. Running the ship on auxiliaries now. Now what I want you to do, doctor, is sign a document testifying to the background of the mutiny as you know it, as well as an affidavit stating that when last seen by you Steggo and his officers were all alive and in as good condition as could be expected."

"If I see them in that state, I will."

"You will. We're letting them go in a small life-boat, with enough to last until they reach a base. If you want to, you may join them. This is a mutinous ship."

"No, thank you." I tried to sound casual. "I'll stay here."

He studied me. "I thought you'd say that. There's something terrifically phony about you, doctor, but I don't have time to figure it out."

I smiled. "I'm grateful for your lack of time." Then I put my cup on the floor. "But your word on this. I can take your word, because the fact you didn't kill Steggo and his officers indicates that you don't intend to turn pirate. Whatever your plans may be, will you tell me on your honor that

you will see to it that I eventually reach earth or earth's authority?"

He pumped my hand in a pulverizing grip. "Word of honor. On my honor as a—a mutineer." We both grinned.

On the way to the air-lock, the man behind me suddenly pushed his shmobber into my back. Startled, I stopped.

"My idea," Ragin said. "When Steggo reaches civilization, he'll tell the story his way. I want him to think you were detained aboard by force. It'll give your testimony more legality and protect you as well. I don't think you want to be investigated."

I thanked him. Quite a guy, this Ragin.

EX-CAPTAIN STEGGO, Chief Engineer Skandelli and five other officers lay on the floor of the little life-boat, restraint yokes about their necks. The fat man glared up madly.

"Cast me adrift in a small boat will you, Ragin? Well, I'll pull through somehow. I'll see you dissolving under the biggest thermons in the galactic navy!"

My guard bent over and spat in his face. "Aaah," he said, "Yer father's shmobber!" "You'll pull through, all right," Ragin said soberly. "You have twelve collapsicons containing every conceivable need." He smiled. "And after you we get rid of that unholy viscodium."

He made rapid adjustments on the restraints, setting them to automatically turn off the binding lines of force within a half-hour. As he stooped over Skandelli, I noticed the chief was wearing a bandage over his chest.

"Do you want to make a little bet, fellow?" the engineer said softly. "I'll bet you my arms against your guts that before we're picked up you'll be warming a cot in a terran prison."

Ragin smiled down at him. "Now that's no way to talk, Skandelli. After you locked yourself in the Dendros and gave my men all that trouble in blasting you out! Some of them had such nice plans for you; they'd just adore keeping you on the *Reward* to play with."

Skandelli turned a creamy white and shut up.

"All set. Get ready to cast off. This guy," he indicated me, "stays with us. So does Ballew. They're hostages."

As the air-lock closed, I heard Steggo's wild shriek, "Dr. Sims, Dr. Sims, I swear you will be avenged!"

There was a *whoosh* as the life-boat arced away.

Ballew typed the papers on the basis of Ragin's written notes. We were alone on the bridge. Obviously, we were trusted.

I looked at Ballew's sullen, pale face. He was young for an officer, even aboard a cargo ship. What was in this for him? I asked him.

"Oh, I don't know," he said, rolling the last sheet out of the machine. "I ran away to sea first because I'd read a lot of books. The great ancients: Conrad, London, Nordhoff and Hall. Then I read books about space—*Mallard's Travels*, Soose, Jon Iim. So I thought I was in too limited a medium and went to astrogation school. But space is as dull as the sea."

I clucked sympathetically and ran my fingers over the smooth finish of the chair. "Things generally are, to a romantic. And you expected to find something really interesting in a mutiny?"

He flushed and I remembered how he had looked when the captain had been roaring at him. "Nothing like that. I knew Ragin on Aldebaran VI—Nascor, that is—and I'd gone on a couple of hunting trips to Aldebaran XVIII with some of the other members of the crew. When I signed on as astrogator I told them of the crew shortage and they came a-running. I even helped them stow their wives aboard." He stared at me defiantly.

Of course, I nodded to show I thought this was no crime under the circumstances. The kid went on.

"I'd never traveled with Steggo before, but I'd heard of him. When he started to pull this mercantile section stuff, I told Rildek and Gonda—Gonda was the guy watching over you all the time—and they passed the word. Tore in here in the middle of the court martial and took over the ship. Steggo was planning to toss those guys and their women through an air-lock!"

"Not a particularly nice thing to do, but the Fino Feminists did manage to wreck three squadrons at the beginning of the war. These men knew that women are strictly forbidden to be present on a ship without official escorts; why in the name

of the Curvature did they bring them?"

He shrugged. "Well, they wanted to build a home in a system where every foot of ground wasn't worth its weight in galactic credits. Aldebaran is almost all ore and almost all staked out. The Solarian asteroids have become pretty cheap during the war; they thought they'd pool their capital and buy one. But the women had to come or they'd be spending half their capital on fares. Aldebaran-Sol is an expensive trip."

"Don't I know!" I read the data he had typed and signed it. "Now I imagine they plan to hole out on Otho or one of the obscure little suns near it."

The papers were tucked in the astro-gator's desk. "Don't know where exactly, except that it must be an uninhabited system and preferably unexplored. You'll be set on a course for Sol. If the ship is found in good condition and no murders are committed, the affair doesn't come under the jurisdiction of the galactic navy especially since it's being demobilized. And you know how much time the Aldebaranian Patrol will spend on a mutiny."

"About as much time as it takes to move the papers from the 'missing in space' to the 'wanted for mutiny' file. But you'll have trouble over women. Only seven of them."

"Maybe." He stretched and the blue plex tightened over a meager chest. "The galaxy is big and business will be sun-bent for expansion after the war. We'll always be able to slip off and get a job somewhere when things cool off."

RAGIN came in heavily and thumbed through the charts. He selected one of them and studied it, swearing softly to himself.

Ballew looked at him inquiringly and continued. "Me, I have the satisfaction of helping my friends against a son of a bilge pump. I also get to know whether life on a desert planetoid is all it's cracked up to be."

"You'll get to know what a thermon tastes like," the tall man snarled suddenly. "Sol was this ship's original course, eh?"

The fair-haired kid had jumped to his feet. "Y-yes," he stuttered. "B-but I thought you could operate steering Dendros. I laid out a new course and all you had to do was st-steer to it."

"We can operate steering Dendros, all right," Ragin sneered. "When they're steerable." He hand flashed up, holding emptiness. My blusterbun.

"After you, doctor. I hope for your sake you are a physical chemist."

I walked ahead of him to the engine room. He gestured me inside. I was not feeling exactly immortal just then.

There was a little bubble of men around the double mass of convoluted machinery in the center. The bubble disintegrated as we came up and I stared at the green transparency for two minutes before I understood.

"Skandelli!" I shouted. "That's what he meant by that threat in the life-boat. And that's what I heard rushing by the outside bulkhead during the mutiny."

"Yeah. The rotten bushaleon holed up in here for an hour. One of the loading pipes runs under the floor-plates to the storage tank. He blasted a piece out of it and as soon the holding pressure went down far enough, the stuff came crawling out over the Dendros. Of course, it congealed faster than it could come out of the small opening so at least the ship wasn't flooded. Not that it makes much difference to us."

I squatted and touched the cold stuff experimentally. Hard as dendraloid itself. "I'm afraid you're out of luck, Ragin. You can't steer with clogged Dendros, and if I know viscodium, you'll never get them unclogged. This ship goes to Sol."

"Maybe the ship does," he said easily. "But you don't."

Their set faces frightened me. "I have your word of honor! And I thought you were one man who wouldn't break it."

"I'm sorry, doctor, but this is one time when my word will have to be plumb disintegrated. We gave most of our high-neutron fuel to that bunch in the life-boat and we couldn't hope to make an uninhabited system unless we brought the ship close to it first. If we get to Sol I might be able to cook up something like an atomic explosion to account for Steggo and his officers as well as the five crew members who were shmobbed off.

"Ballew will back me up. As an officer, his testimony will be useful. *If* we all tell our stories straight, and *if* Steggo hasn't been picked up yet, we *might* be able to get away with it. But you're an outsider; we

could never take a chance on your suddenly remembering what your civics teacher said. No, you either unstuck those Dendros or become our first planned corpse."

Sharp muzzles jabbed into my back. "But Ragin—I'm a physical, not a mucilaginous chemist. Do you know what viscodium is? There's a joke in the student labs: what viscodium hath joined together, no man can put asunder. It takes on the physical properties of whatever it congeals around and dendraloid is the hardest substance in the galaxy. If you try to split the block, you split the Dendros, too. The manufacturers are still working on a softener. They warn people not to use the stuff unless they intend it to be permanent."

"Well, Dr. Sims, you better start inventing," the leader said over his shoulder. He paused at the exit hatch. "You got exactly three weeks, figuring on terran time."

"No! Why don't you tell the unit of liquid measure is the Sirian drom? Something I don't know, I mean." I wasn't being sarcastic; I was scared.

Three weeks to solve a problem that had the best men in the field telling funny stories to their libidoses about their ids. No lab and no equipment. And me, a neutronium specialist!

"Run down to the medicine chest and see if there's any scaralx aboard," I told one of my guards. It had proven effective in treatment of people suffering from viscodium cancer, the result of a liquid drop touching the skin.

The man tore out of the engine room. I found a morose satisfaction in the discovery that I would get cooperation. "Like wearing an overcoat under thermon fire."

He came back with a container of scaralx which said in large letters: DANGER! THIS COMPOUND IS TO BE TAKEN ONLY AS THE PHYSICIAN PRESCRIBES! DO NOT USE INTERNALLY.

I opened the container feverishly. There were five aspirin tablets and an eye-dropper inside.

FOUR days later, Ragin looked in on me on his daily tour of inspection. I had gotten around to using banked thermons. My eyes were red with fatigue. They let me go to my cabin whenever I wanted, but I hadn't been able to sleep. I was going to

solve this problem and get to earth in one piece, or I was going to burst my frontal lobe.

"How's it going, doc?" the big man asked.

"Not so good," I gritted. "I don't dare use too much juice for fear of melting the machinery. I've been trying to run it on an alternating current generator so that the heat is applied only to the surface in short bursts. But this stuff conducts too damn fast. I'll solve it somehow, though."

"Attaboy," he encouraged. "That's the old scientific spirit."

He wilted under my glare. "Sorry. I've no call to be funny. I wish those slobs—Steggo and Skandelli—were here. They'd have their mouths washed with viscodium, they would. Although," he considered, "they probably despise us just as much as we do them. You're the only innocent bystander."

The women, dressed in gay Aldebaranian frocks, were peering anxiously through the hatch. I thought of how much workable Dendros meant to them. After all, their claim was as just as mine.

"Forget it."

"You see," he explained anxiously, "this is a democracy we have here, a democracy of the purest kind because it's close as yet to the conditions which produced it. I'm only the leader; and even if I wanted to set you free because I trust you, the rest of the men can't feel that sure."

"I understand. You have a sound mind, Ragin. A pity only solarians and sagittarians are allowed in galactic government."

"Yeah. That's what I kept telling them."

Everybody laughed and tension dissolved. Gonda leaned over his shmobber and said to a neighbor: "See what did I tell you—the doc is a good guy!"

The tall mutineer came over and stood at my side. Together we stared at the stubborn viscodium, green and immovable.

We all perspired quietly in useless, repetitious thought.

"It beats the living shavings out of me," Ragin said finally, "how that goo won't let us make any adjustments in the Dendros that will turn us away from the Solarian Patrol, but keeps them working the way they were set."

"Property of the substance," I yawned wearily. "In order to steer you must use

the Dendros as moving parts; viscodium between the parts precludes that. However Dendros merely vibrate through the space warp on straight drive; the viscodium having assumed the characteristics of the substance to which it adheres, vibrates along with it, actually adding to its efficiency. If the Dendros stop, so does the viscodium. Any activity of the bound object automatically becomes an activity of that filthy slime."

"Suppose you change the make-up of the Dendros, then. You could negate them and take the whole business apart with hypertongs. After we got rid of the viscodium, the boys would reassemble the machines and make 'em solid. No?"

I shook my head. "No. Space negation is dangerous enough with the proper equipment and under the proper conditions. Here, you'd just save the Solarian Patrol a lot of grief by tearing a hole right through the ether. Besides, you can't negate dendraloid. Of course, if you could change the physical properties of dendraloid enough to pick the viscodium off, you'd be set. But any way I figure it, you wind up without any motors at all."

"And with the ship carrying no transmitter, that would not be nice. No matter what these damned bushaleons are doing to us, we have to keep them in good condition. I have the boys oiling them internally every six hours. That's the minimum period according to the manual."

When I could get my tongue disentangled from my teeth, I grabbed his arm. "Oil them? What kind of oil?"

He looked down, puzzled. "Machine oil. Not the terran kind—"

"You poor, broken blasthead!" I yelled. "Is there any molecular joint lubricant on this filthy, meteor-broken scow?"

A light of purest joy broke over his face. He snapped out an order.

One of the men scurried to a cabinet and peered inside. At his triumphant shout everybody exhaled gustily.

"Use the mittens," I called to him. "There should be a pair of insulated mittens next to the case."

The Aldebaranian came staggering back with a container whose walls were made of thinnest neutronium. Inside it splashed the most beautiful purple liquid I'd ever seen. Molecular oil!

It meant a reprieve from the negative space foundries for the men. It meant a reprieve from imprisonment with Fino Feminists for the women. As for me—it meant reprieve . . .

"Dig up a couple of loading pipes," I ordered. "Clean ones. They're the only things that have linings to take the stuff. You can make one of them into a funnel and cup it under the whole block of Dendros and solid viscodium. Then run a pipe from the funnel to an air-lock and if it works we can pump the goo right out into space."

"If it works!" Ragin caroled. "It's got to work! We're down to our last electron in this pot. It's got to work!"

It worked.

We poured the purple liquid into a vat of sirian machine oil. Then we squirted the mixture, at the highest pressure we could generate, along the Dendro input pipes under the floor plates. It took a while for the super lubricant to work its way through the heavy colloid. Then the outside of the machinery shone with a sudden purple sheen as oil oozed through the molecules of dendraloid.

Ragin yelled and pounded my back into my chest.

Slowly the viscodium changed from green to purple. It became softer and softer, as the physical characteristics of the object it gripped changed from solid to liquid. Finally, it flowed evenly into the funnel. We heard it gurgling through the loading pipe on the way to the air-lock, moving slower and becoming more viscous as it went.

One of the mutineers volunteered to crawl under the Dendros. While we watched breathlessly, he held the neutronium container under the tapering, bottom point of the drive motors. He caught every drop of the molecular joint lubricant in the container. Naturally—he had to.

BALLEW turned from his charts and said, "I hope you won't get angry, but the men are—well, insistent that you stay in your cabin while the life-boats are leaving. It isn't that they don't trust you, but—"

"They feel my conscience will help my mouth in depriving the Solarian Patrol of information if I don't know where they're heading. I understand."

He smiled at me out of poor teeth. "That's it. While you were prying the viscodium loose, I was a prisoner in the bridge. And I've known these men for years. They felt, that as an officer, I didn't have the same size stake as say Ragin has, with his wife involved the way she is. They were right. That's why I'm staying aboard with you. I'm going on to Sol."

"Are you that confident I won't inform on you?"

A rustle of charts as he turned one around. There was a youthful grin on his face. "Yes. You see we had your cabin searched before the mutiny. Nothing important was found. Except for half a container of *unused* depilo-sac dissolving in the waste chamber."

I stopped breathing and sat up straight. What a stupid slip!

"Ragin claimed it meant nothing. I didn't think so. I thought about it and thought about it until I came to the one possible solution. Now I know you have just as much interest in my not talking about this trip as I have in your keeping quiet. So I'm going on to Sol and after the patrol finishes its routine check—it won't be more than that with Ragin taking all responsibility in the log—I'll go my way and you'll go yours, *Doctor Sims*."

"Have you told anyone else?"

"Only Ragin, just after you finished with that mess in the engine room. He didn't believe it at first."

I bounded out of the room. Ragin was in his cabin with his wife. They were packing.

When I entered, he was almost halfway through the ninety-five volumes of the *Encyclopaedia Galactica*. As each volume passed into the force field of the collapsicon, it diminished to one-twentieth of its original size. I stared at the miniature books lying at the bottom of the mechanical valise.

The Aldebaranian woman left quietly in response to her husband's signal. I cleared my throat. "Don't open that thing suddenly when you start unpacking, or you'll think an avalanche hit you."

He shifted uncomfortably. "I know. I've used collapsicons before." There was a silence.

"Er-how do you expect to live on a bare planetoid? You can't grow food where there isn't oxygen."

"Oh, we sunk our money in extractors. We'll be able to suck enough raw elements out of whatever we hit to get started. After that it's a matter of our own ingenuity."

"And the books are for your children?"

"Yeah, Elsa wants a lot of them. And I'm going to see they grow up with all the knowledge the galaxy has available."

Ragin coughed. "By the Hole in Cygnus, doctor, why couldn't you wait? A naval employee, too! Six months and the liners would be running again, and everything would be open and above-board."

"I have a son in a naval hospital on earth," I told him. "We haven't seen each other in three years and I still couldn't get a priority. He may be dead in six months."

"Yes, that would be it. But your papers—"

"My papers refer to Dr. R. Sims, physical chemist, of naval research, Aldebaranian Project CBX-19329. Horkey, my superior, made them out for me just that way, gave me an indefinite leave of absence and wished me luck."

He squeezed my hand in a last, friendly mangle and accompanied me to the door. "Don't worry about Ballew. He's a good kid. The only reason he mentioned his discovery at all, was because he decided to go to Sol and he wanted you to know how secure he felt. He's read too many books, maybe."

BEFORE they left, the mutineers showed Ballew and me how to set the Dendros. In the end, he worked out the charts and I tended the machinery. Just as well I felt safer that way.

"You know," Ballew said lazily as he waited for the solarian warpers to pull us into the system. "All I can think of is a little old bar in New York. A little old bar where I'm going to get stinking drunk."

He was cute. Personally, I was dreaming of Max's Salon in Chicago. Max's where I, Roberta Sims, Sc. D., Ph. D., Ga. D., would be getting a glorious terrestrial permanent wave.

After my hair had grown back, of course.